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Set Boundaries Out Of Love For Yourself

By Regina V. Cates

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Have you heard the song, “You Always Hurt the One You Love?” The truth is love does not hurt. Control, domination, abuse, mistreatment, and dishonesty hurt, but love does not.

For example, a friend of mine has an unmarried adult daughter who became pregnant. There was no stigma for my friend around her daughter’s pregnancy; however, she had a problem with the boyfriend, who abused her daughter by psychologically tormenting and manipulating her and showing her disrespect. She also had difficulty with his mother, who defended her son’s unacceptable behavior.

The daughter also excused the boyfriend, saying she loved him. She refused to listen to her mother or sister, both of whom asked her to see the man for what his repeated behavior revealed was the truth of his character. Their words fell on deaf ears, because her infatuation with her boyfriend was blind.

Doesn’t infatuation see what it wants to see?

How can our (love) affection be genuine, or last, if it’s based on a fantasy of what we hope someone or a relationship will be?

Shouldn’t we depend on someone’s behavior as proof they are loving us, or not?

With every fight, the daughter complained about how badly her boyfriend treated her. Each time, her mother and sister reasserted she had to end the relationship. The young woman repeatedly refused to let the man go. She believed her love was strong enough to change him. What she did not realize was that she did not care enough for herself—which would take the form of her integrity’s self-respect, self-confidence, and worthiness—to say no and set healthy boundaries against his unhealthy abuse.

The daughter, like many of us, believed love endures all things.

“The truth is, love cannot and should not withstand all things.”

While all relationships have challenges, affection expressed positively, as our integrity in action, does not tolerate the dishonest or abusive actions

of other people. No matter if someone is a family member or a close friend, we do not have to hang in there, allowing them to dump their anger, self-centeredness, and emotional unconsciousness onto us.

Allowing ourselves to be mistreated is not how to care for someone, or ourselves. Which means, our affection for someone may demand that we rock the boat. Because for us to love and be loved, we need to know that always turning the other cheek to abuse is a misconception about love that is wrong and unhealthy.

Don’t we need to know when to turn the other cheek to someone’s behavior and when to set a strong boundary?

It is one thing to let the rude and self-centered-but-not-emotionally-or-physically-abusive mistreatment of strangers go, like when a driver cuts us off in traffic. But people who live an integrity-centered life do not endure abuse in our relationships. We accept that it is healthy and necessary to set strong boundaries against non-loving behavior because unless we do so we are enabling the bad behavior to continue.

We must be comfortable setting boundaries in our relationships because many of us are confused about what it means to give or receive love. To show love, we behave in positive ways: patience, respect, kindness, honesty, etc. To be loved, we receive the same positive and compassionate treatment. But when other people hurt, they often project their pain onto us through mistreatment. And, when we hurt emotionally, we often thoughtlessly project our inner pain and frustration onto others.

Have you ever told someone you loved them in the morning, then screamed at them in the evening?

I have. It feels horrible.

One day I had a talk with myself. “Regina, how do you justify treating the people you ‘love’ badly? How can you tell your friends you love them then treat them with disrespect or rudeness? How do you justify telling family you love them then turn

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around and be dishonest or speak to them harshly? How can you really show love to your pets if you are impatient, rough, or expect them to reason like a human being?"

When I hurt people, it was because I was hurting. I took my frustration and disappointment out on others instead of looking within to find the source(s) of my pain. One day I found the courage to honestly look at myself. That is when I began to admit and heal my emotional wounds. Responsibly dealing with my emotions is what helped me stop taking my pain out on others and on myself. Through counseling I learned that not setting and enforcing my boundaries was codependent behavior and allowed those who would abuse me to do so. It took great courage, and practice, but when I stopped permitting people to treat me badly or stopped blindly following others, and instead took the actions I knew I needed to take, I felt strong and proud of myself. I no longer cared about being disowned by others when I realized disowning myself and my values was the ultimate betrayal.

So how did my friend deal with her daughter?

My friend knew the young man's treatment of her daughter was not love. Since the young woman would not look at the man for who he was, my friend knew her daughter did not care for herself. Without the self-respect necessary to honor herself, the daughter would have remained in this unhealthy dynamic.

In this case, my friend exercised a tough-love option. Since her daughter lived with her, she asked her daughter to leave her home. My friend knows love is always positive, even when it seems to act in the opposite way to stop enabling negative behavior. She knew as long as she allowed her daughter to stay, the young woman had a place to return after each mistreatment and argument.

When this option was removed, her daughter was faced with a choice. Either continue to take and excuse the man's abuse or begin to care for herself and admit she was being treated unacceptably. This was a choice only she could make. No matter how much my friend (loves) cares for her, even as her mother, she was still powerless to change the behavior, perception, or self-esteem of her daughter.

Isn't acting from love's integrity always positive?

Even when those with whom a boundary is set do not see it as loving?

At first my friend's daughter was angry at having to move out of her mother's home. She felt abandoned. She became distant and manipulative. She blamed her mother when the relationship with her boyfriend spiraled out of control. But after living with her boyfriend, she had a change of heart.

My friend's daughter finally realized how she allowed herself to be mistreated by her boyfriend and his mother. Her mother's loving boundary helped open her heart to the reality of her situation. Yet, the young woman had to care enough for herself to finally say no to taking or enabling further abuse.

Isn't it a misconception to think our love has the power to change other people?

If we are more understanding, patient, or scream louder; if we are more logical or say it in a different way, we may think an irresponsible person will magically wake up. This is not the case. If our caring and affection had the power to transform people into kind, responsible, and thoughtful individuals, our relationships would not experience the abuse and conflict they do.

Loving another person does not mean we should enable him or her to mistreat us. Loving means not abusing or mistreating anyone or anything for any reason. People who do not treat us with kindness, respect, and courtesy are not expressing love. So, it is necessary to learn to set boundaries out of love for ourselves. We do so by learning what boundaries are, what they are not, and the steps involved in establishing clear limits.

What Boundaries Are

A boundary is a limit we set to protect and take care of ourselves. People will treat us as we allow them to. Boundaries let other people know our availability, values, and the conditions under which we will interact. Healthy, clearly communicated boundaries identify our needs, feelings, and rights

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in relationship to others. Boundaries let others know we respect and value ourselves. The ability to establish and maintain guidelines is necessary to be responsible for ourselves and to create positive relationships with others. Boundaries help us determine the things we want to do and those we don't and to stand up for ourselves without guilt for putting our needs first. Without establishing the behaviors we will and will not tolerate from others, we leave ourselves open to becoming angry and resentful about how we are allowing ourselves to be treated. And, we must respect the boundaries other people set for themselves.

What Boundaries Are Not

Establishing how we want to be treated is not about control or manipulation. We do not set boundaries to change other people. We do so to change us -to create a better, more positive life for ourselves by defining acceptable behavior, claiming the status of healthy adult, and demonstrating a commitment to self-respect. We know our boundaries have been set in a healthful manner when we clearly state what behavior is hurtful to us, yet we do not have expectations of a particular outcome. We set the boundary for ourselves while realizing the other person is completely responsible for making changes to his or her behavior.

Setting strong, lasting boundaries requires us to: define acceptable behavior, accept that doing nothing is condoning bad treatment, calmly and clearly express our feelings, and be comfortable not being popular.

1. Define acceptable behavior.

As a child and young adult I was molested by a male baby sitter and doctor. I suffered under religious and societal persecution. For much of childhood and young adulthood, I endured mistreatment. So growing up, and for much of my young adult life, I did not know I could say no to mistreatment. I did not know how to set boundaries with the hurtful people in my life.

It felt safer to blend in, to become invisible. When conflict arose, I did not want to make waves or rock the boat. I wanted to keep peace and be the one who smoothed over unpleasant situations.

When I was threatened with physical harm by a babysitter who was molesting me, I did not speak up.

We learn how to behave from our parents, family members, friends, peers, and television. But that does not mean the behavior we were taught or exposed to is acceptable. Hitting, screaming, inappropriate touching, humiliation, rage, control, dishonesty, irresponsibility, blame, jealousy, lying, cheating, stealing, sexual abuse, physical and psychological abuse, denial, etc., are not the behaviors that create a positive life. Negative behavior hurts. Acceptable behavior is that which aligns with love:



Don't we have to define loving behavior so we can create the life and relationships we truly want?

While growing up, my friend Peter was used as a punching bag by his alcoholic father. He was the frequent target of misplaced rage, disappointment, and feelings of inadequacy. Yet Peter is a loving, peaceful, and thoughtful father. Long ago he made the deliberate choice not to be like his own father. He broke the cycle of abuse by assuming responsibility for dealing with his emotional wounds. He did not want to take his abuse out on himself, other people, or other living things.

Peter realized his father did not know to look inside himself to address whatever abuse he had endured that caused him to drown his emotional pain and

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lash out at his family. Peter's father did not question his actions. But my friend knows we are emotional beings who need to look within to heal the holes in our heart, so we do not let our pain dictate how we treat other adults or children and animals.

Isn't it loving for parents to address the holes within their heart, so they don't pass their wounding on to their children?

The first step to being comfortable setting boundaries is to define acceptable behavior. The behaviors that align with love are acceptable. Treatment that does not align with our heart is not acceptable. Once we define acceptable behavior the second step is to agree that when we do not courageously set a healthy boundary with unhealthy behavior we are in essence telling someone it is okay to abuse and mistreat us.

2. Accept that doing nothing is condoning bad treatment.

Many years ago I dated an alcoholic. I did not know it in the beginning, but over time it became clear as the number of intoxicated incidents began to add up. After each occurrence there was an apology, a request for forgiveness, and a promise it would not happen again. No matter how much I wanted the drinking to stop, it did not. No matter how much I prayed for follow-through on the promise to seek help there was none. For too long I chose to believe what was promised rather than accepting the repeated actions as proof of what was actually true.

While I thought turning the other cheek was how I loved someone, it wasn't. I realized not standing up against abusive and disrespectful treatment was actually helping to keep the abusive and negative situations alive. Doing nothing was enabling others to continue behaving badly. When they refused to honor my boundaries, it was clear they were not willing to treat me with respect.

Likewise, paying the rent for a drug-abusing adult child who is doing nothing to acknowledge or deal with their addiction is not aligned with the integrity of love. Ignoring the corrupt actions of a politician because they are a member of our political party is not honorable. Allowing an abusive spouse back

into the relationship without witnessing, over a long period of time, their new, consistently responsible behavior is not love. Turning a blind eye to the despicable behavior of people in government because they press an agenda we support, such as abortion or limiting the rights of certain people, is not loving. Supporting a minister who spews hatred of gays or the subjugation of women; defending or ignoring abusive behavior from our employer; ignoring a family member's racist hate-speech; or enabling any physical, emotional, or psychologically abusive behavior to continue without challenge is not aligned with the integrity of our soul that is love.

If we don't say no, by setting a healthy boundary out of love for ourselves, isn't that really telling someone their bad, abusive behavior is acceptable?

Albert Einstein said, "No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it." With the realization that I could change my situation by changing myself, I found tremendous power in learning to set boundaries with people who disrespected and mistreated me. I also left those people who were physically abusive. No matter how many promises were made or how many times they apologized for their behavior, I finally understood people who abuse will say anything to keep the situation as it is.

Physical abusers are not going to change unless they truly want to and they get professional help to do so. Only by leaving did my situation change for the better-regardless if theirs did or not.

You do not have the power to help people who consistently abuse you. But, you do give them the power to continue abusing when you stay, rather than setting that boundary and, if necessary, leaving. Admitting that not standing up against abuse is actually condoning bad treatment is a vital step to setting healthy boundaries in your relationships. Next you must become comfortable expressing your needs, wants, feelings, and boundaries.

3. Calmly and clearly express our feelings.

When I was eleven years old, I was hit in the head with a baseball bat. It was an accident. I was playing

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baseball with a few kids from the neighborhood in the backyard of our home on Locust Street in Victoria, Texas. I was catching. I did not think my playmate would swing at the badly pitched ball, and I moved forward. She did swing, and hit me on my left temple with the thick part of the bat.

You can imagine the initial agony of being hit in the head with a baseball bat. Still, no matter how badly our body is damaged, terrible temporary physical pain pales in comparison to lasting emotional pain.

The profound emotional wounding I experienced growing up gay and abused under judgmental, fearful, and controlling religious dogma hurt worse, and did far more damage, than the baseball bat. For too many years, I was unable to productively express the deep misery, unworthiness, and loneliness I felt. I felt isolated and undeserving of healthy, loving connections with people. I did not want to be seen.

With no support and no one with whom I could share my pain, the anguish, isolation, and social stigma against expressing my feelings forced me to keep my emotions bottled up tight. However, the unexpressed hurt I worked so hard to ignore was always there simmering, then bubbling, inevitably to boil over.

When the top blew, I raged and became self-destructive and abusive toward other people. I was arrogant, sarcastic, and condescending. Too often I behaved like a jerk, venting and trying unsuccessfully to deal with the seething indignation I harbored at being abused.

Isn't talking about our feelings and experiences and expressing our boundaries vital to creating emotionally intimate relationships, including the relationship we have with ourselves?

Love creates an environment when we can freely share what we are feeling. We are comfortable expressing our needs, desires, and boundaries when love is the bond that holds the relationship together.

Through counseling I learned that when setting boundaries, it is vital to communicate without blaming the other person, even if he or she is guilty.

Limits are set for your protection and self-respect. That means it is imperative to stay focused on and responsible for yourself, to communicate directly about someone's behavior, how it makes you feel, and what you want.

For example:

When you speak to me disrespectfully, I feel sad, blamed, and attacked. I want you to treat me with patience and respect.

When you watch television and I have to repeatedly say your name to get your attention, I feel angry, hurt, discounted, and insignificant. I want you to answer me when I talk to you. I want you to acknowledge and communicate with me.

When you leave your dirty clothes on the floor, I feel disgusted and used. I want you to pick up after yourself.

When you rage and raise your fist, I feel fearful, intimidated, and unsafe. I feel like you are going to hit me. I do not want you to threaten me, ever.

If you ever hit me or the children or abuse the pets, I will call the authorities. I will file a complaint and press criminal charges. I will leave the relationship.

When you identify hurtful behavior, it is not necessary that you defend, debate, or over-explain your boundary. The goal is to communicate peacefully and directly, and be specific. If they refuse to cooperate, let them know of the possible consequences of disregarding your request. In the case of violence, contact the authorities.

Unless you are in immediate physical danger, or the situation has escalated to the point you and the other person have stopped listening to one another, establish the boundary in the moment. If there is clear communication, then do not wait to express your needs. Make an immediate request that they stop the behavior.

It is important to understand that changing behaviors, such as learning to communicate feelings clearly or asking for what you want, takes time. Unless physically threatened, be patient with

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others and allow them the opportunity to change. Also, make sure the consequence impacts the other person more than it does you -grounding a teenager for a month, for example, leaves you on call to provide transportation for their commitments, etc.

It takes enormous courage and willpower to speak up against the mistreatment we experience or witness. It takes determination to overcome the fear of being ridiculed or not taken seriously or being punished for speaking up. However, one of the most productive things we can do is acknowledge what we feel.

When someone loves us they want to understand how we feel. Love is comfortable respecting the boundaries we set for ourselves. Only relationships that are unhealthy are uncomfortable with clearly stated boundaries. Therefore, we must set boundaries out of love for ourselves even while knowing that not everyone will be receptive.

4. Be comfortable not being popular.

Setting a boundary is one thing, but unless you are willing to enforce it, no matter how small or large, the people (children too) with whom you have set the boundary will not take you seriously. Consistency is a critical part of maintaining your self-respect. Remaining true to your boundaries is especially important because we often become unpopular when we establish limits.

Regardless if the boundary is set over dirty laundry or to prevent physical harm, you must be willing to do whatever it takes to remain true to your word. If you are not willing to leave the relationship, then do not say you will.

I have set countless boundaries with people over the course of my life, and I was not popular for doing so. When I decided I was worth more than how I was being treated, it was like shining a spotlight on other people's behavior. But, I bravely did what I knew in my heart was the most self-loving and respectful thing to do and I did not budge.

For instance, I was "obligated" by the unwritten rules of society and family to attend an event that I said I would not attend again. I did not confirm I

would go. It was assumed.

Several years ago I walked out of a similar family gathering, setting a boundary out of love for myself. Prior to that day, I had endured misdirected and irresponsible anger. Each gathering turned into a shouting match, or a denigrating discussion of politics, or an argument over a movie. After a history of consistently negative events, I had had enough.

I know people change, and I have forgiven each of the parties involved. Yet forgiveness does not mean I have forgotten the pain. So I completely understand how hard it is to set boundaries with those we care for who do not know how to behave in loving and respectful ways.

If setting a boundary with someone becomes uncomfortable for them, it does not mean we must back down. We do not have to be unkind, but we do have to remain strong. Remember that saying no and setting a boundary with abusive, irresponsible, or controlling people is challenging the hold they think they have on you.

You are completely in charge of your own power, so do not give it away by feeling guilty or allowing them to talk you out of the decision you made for your greater good. Part of treating yourself with love's behaviors is to bravely and firmly stay the course, no matter what anyone else says.

We are responsible for setting and upholding the boundary, but we are not responsible if the other person chooses to test or ignore the boundary. After sufficient time without positive movement, you will know it is time to set the boundary again or refuse to have a relationship with them.

Healthy Relationships Have Healthy Boundaries

To establish and grow positive relationships is the foundation of a joyful and fulfilled life. These positive relationships involve mutual respect, patience, responsibility, understanding, cooperation, regard, support, and clear communication. A relationship that lacks these qualities lacks loving behavior. That includes the relationship we have with ourselves.

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Understand that being a doormat is a lack of self-respect and self-love, because if we abuse ourselves, then we will allow others to abuse us. Stop self-abuse by making love's behaviors a real part of your heart, so you treat yourself lovingly. Know that it is healthy to set boundaries with people because it is part of loving yourself.

Define the acceptable behaviors aligned with love. Love yourself by standing up for yourself through communicating how you desire to be treated.

Learn to calmly and directly express your feelings without blaming the other person.

Do not allow abuse or mistreatment to continue, hoping the other person will change.

Accept that setting boundaries is not necessarily going to make you popular.

Once you set a boundary, stand by it.

Remain strong in the truth that by setting boundaries against mistreatment, you are aligning with the positive, loving way of living.

While you are powerless to control or change other people, you do have the power to cut off associations with people who bring you down, are consistently negative, expose you to dangerous circumstances, or who tell you who you should be rather than supporting the best of who you are.

Love yourself by setting boundaries with anybody who believes it is okay to "hurt the ones they say they love." If what is being dumped on you is abuse, jealousy, projection, anger, guilt, fear, blame, or attempts to manipulate or control, remember, none of these is LOVE.

What Boundaries Do You Need to Set and With Whom?

Regina

